

Classroom Notes
November 2020

November 9, 2020

The time following parent teacher conferences is motivating. The preparation I go through for each single conference entails observing your children, thinking through their strengths and needs, and making plans to further their development. The Montessori approach to educating children relies heavily on teacher observation and knowledge of the curriculum. The curriculum is extremely developmental in nature, building one small step at a time. The curriculum also helps to pinpoint the exact skills needed for mastery of concepts. During my career, first as a student of education, then a traditional elementary teacher, and eventually a special needs teacher and trainer prior to getting my Montessori degree, I have yet to find a more comprehensive and effective curriculum for educating children. That says a lot. Next week I will write about the Montessori materials, continuing the trend. I believe the next topic promised is sandpaper letters.

I received feedback from a few of you (note, I love to hear from you following my parent updates), that you enjoyed the periodic letters addressing developmental issues for children (sleep and food) and the letters about practical life, sensorial materials, and geography thus far.

I will take just a few lines to talk about reading to your children. In my research, especially from a book titled The Read Aloud Handbook, by Jim Trelease, it is stated that reading to your children and modeling reading of all kinds in their presence (cookbooks, maps, newspapers, magazines, directions for new purchases, novels, spiritual reading, news articles, etc.) are two of the best things you can do to insure your child becomes a reader. In our household reading before bed was the perfect time to read aloud to our children, but you'll have to find what works best for your household. The older your child grows, the harder it is to find distraction-free quality time, so setting a routine now of reading each day/night is a wonderful way to strengthen your bond and give your family something to be excited about together. Exposing your child to language is proven to help expand their vocabulary. Depending on your child's age, reading materials may differ. I love to talk about books and have many suggestions regarding favorites. There are many sources for finding good literature, but the most obvious is the children's librarian at Samuel's Public Library. The SPL is one of the best! If I were to offer a note of caution, much of what is marketed these days in book form is a continuation of screen time characters. I highly recommend you choose different forms of good, rich literature that are time tested. If your children love cartoon-like characters there is always The Cat in the Hat and Clifford the Dog.

The kindergarten students are all currently involved in writing winter holiday-themed stories for their annual writing contest. Mountain Laurel is typically very well represented with first, second, and third place accolades for all grade levels. It is not uncommon to see our student's art on the covers of the annual publication of winners. We are so proud of our students!

For those of you interested I found a great source that I use titled 30 Chapter Books to Read Aloud to Preschoolers. This is for the older children, five or six.

<https://everyday-reading.com/read-aloud-books-for-preschoolers/>

All the best,
Carrie

November 15, 2020

Friday afternoon was spent in the woods on a gorgeous fall day. We took a vote before we left whether we should take the "tricky" trail after the rain earlier in the week. The result of the vote was a resounding YES to the tricky trail. From youngest to oldest we tromped up the trail together. Some would see the time spent in the woods as pure fun. Fun it was, but only a teacher would think of how this time fits so perfectly into the education of children. The budding botanists in our group collected and classified sassafras leaves and oak leaves. The competitive botanists tried to find the largest oak leaves. The oak leaves were particularly popular because our young historians were remembering back to the early colonists cutting down an oak tree to make planks to cover the skeleton of the Treadwell, a ship that came to America after the Mayflower. The chefs in the group were making beautiful plates of food on wood cookies. Their collections led them to the identification of locust pods because, of course they needed some seeds to flavor their delectable dishes. The analysis of trees led the entomologists to a colony of ants in a dead tree and a discussion and debate ensued about what kinds of insects woodpeckers eat by the ornithologists. Most popular in our historical readings in November have been from a book called [Inside a Tepee](#). Since the elementary kids have a tepee built in the woods, the children could recall all kinds of details and act them out. They reminisced about the tepee structure having a hole in the top for wood smoke and flaps to cover the hole when it rained. They pretended to hunt and we discussed how the women would stretch the skins over the skeleton of the tepee and how the men in the group were the hunters back then. They found all kinds of sticks and rocks and imagined them like the tools mentioned in the book.

All of the children were working on their handwriting skills in the woods, too. What? Yes, I said that correctly. The children were all working on their handwriting skills by strengthening their gross motor skills. The gross motor skills involved in handwriting mainly refer to the postural control that is required for writing. Efficient control of the larger muscle groups of the neck, shoulder and trunk is necessary to maintain stability in order for the fingers and hands to move to complete the handwriting task. So don't worry that we were ONLY having fun! The running, lifting, climbing and swinging all contributed to your child's writing skills! (A special thanks to Mr. Burling for his verve for helping little ones to have fun on the swing. He makes special time to accompany us on our woods adventures to push kids on the swings. The children love it!)

As promised this email is finally getting to the promised topic of handwriting. Dr. Montessori developed the prepared environment of a primary classroom while always keeping the development of the hand in mind. Any past pictures you have seen of children involved with Montessori materials indirectly assists writing grasp. Scissors, paint brushes, scrub brushes, knobbed puzzles and heavy objects to carry, all assist in developing their pincer grasp and strengthening the small muscles in the hand so important to writing. Specific to this email are the sandpaper letters, another ingenious invention by Dr. Montessori. The sandpaper letters are a big part of both writing and reading. When introduced the sandpaper letters are for the tactile feeling of the letter formation. They have multiple benefits:

- Motor memory of the letter formation packed with the added tactile feeling on the fingertips

- Hearing the sound name each time the letter is traced, reinforcing the sound game lessons how words start and end with specific sounds
- Combining the visual, auditory, tactile and vestibular senses for the most impact

The sandpaper letters your children use are cursive. Your children are some of the only children being taught and utilizing cursive handwriting in today's educational culture. From much research I have learned that cursive handwriting stimulates brain synapses and synchronicity between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, something absent from printing and typing. Learning to write in cursive is shown to improve brain development in the areas of thinking, language and working memory. (The Benefits of Cursive Go Beyond Handwriting, Suzanne Baruch Asherson, Occupational Therapist and presenter for Handwriting Without Tears) Most importantly I can tell you from many years of experience in your child's classroom, it works. Young children learn to write in cursive. First by tracing sandpaper letters, then by writing on a chalkboard, then on paper, usually unlined first and then lined.

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November 29, 2020

At-home activities for November 30 - December 11, 2020

I am asking parents to let me know what activities they would like for me to provide for them over the course of the two week closure. Those of you who would like school-type activities during the next two weeks can be provided with some ideas, suggestions, and/or materials. Some of you may not have schedules that accommodate school-type activities. It is up to you what your preferences are. I will list some choices by age, but first will say:

For all children (at all times) I encourage you to read aloud. If you haven't started that rich tradition of read-aloud time, now is a good time to begin. For five and six-year-old children getting involved in chapter books is a lovely way to look forward to read-aloud time together. I provided a list of 30 Chapter Books at an earlier date. Here is the list for you if interested:

[30 Chapter Books to Read Aloud to Preschoolers](#)

Note that the Little House on the Prairie Series is a lovely series for kindergarten-aged children and the Ingalls family celebrates old fashioned Christmas traditions in the books.

Depending on family preference and ages of children, books selections can be vast. At this season of the year some choices include the birth of Jesus, some emphasize the Menorah, and some emphasize Santa Claus. I just ordered a chapter read aloud for my grandson titled How Winston Delivered Christmas, by Alex T. Smith. From reviews I have deciphered that it has twenty-four and a half chapters, one for each day in December. He may be young for it since it is listed as a 6-8 year-old read-aloud. I will decipher that when I pre read it. Classics such as the Grinch Who Stole Christmas and The Polar Express may be fun for some of you. So many of the stories have been made into movies or shows, that many families don't take advantage of the read-aloud aspect. I encourage you to do it differently. Read first! According to Jim Trelease, a read-aloud advocate and scholar: We **read to children** for all the same **reasons** we talk with **children**: to reassure, to entertain, to bond, to inform or explain, to arouse curiosity, and to inspire. But in **reading aloud**, we also build vocabulary and condition the **child's** brain to associate **reading** with pleasure. Children develop comprehension skills and get a jump start on literacy. Reading aloud to children and offering a great variety of reading materials is a great gift. And there is no need to stop the read-aloud time once your child learns to read. It is still very valuable!

Since we spend afternoons in the woods at school once a week, and it's a time for special trees in some of our homes, I often spend time in December looking at different types of evergreen trees. The children love a particular evergreen in our woods, a Juniper tree. Junipers are aromatic evergreen trees or shrubs of the cypress family. They mean a lot to us because we love to collect the berries, and we have a special friend in our class with that name! Two books I was planning to read aloud to the children as part of our tree study are Pick a Pine Tree, by Patricia Toht, and The Tree

That's Meant to Be, by Yuva Zommer. The first would inspire us to string cranberries and popcorn for outside decorations, something I did with my children when they were small. Sewing and stringing activities are wonderful for our bonding time as well as developing fine motor skills. The second book is written in metrical structure and reinforces the rhyming and story-writing activities in our class.

At this time of year it is also a time for sharing family traditions. Stories about your childhood and your relatives oftentimes end up to be the things your child will treasure the most! In a year where time in person may not be as prevalent in your family, the stories will be even more important. Never underestimate the importance of storytelling. Facetime with grandparents can be tricky (I know this from experience!), but there may be moments captured that can be sweet and precious. (I know this from experience too!) Cooking together and making the family's treasured cookies, gingerbread houses, or ethnic treats is a great way to engage children in the traditions. I find that time in the kitchen inspires the stories about "when I was a kid," or "my grandfather used to," or any number of memories that the time spent measuring and sweeping up flour together can inspire. Remember when you are buying gifts for your child this season that books and practical life materials such as brooms and dustpans to sweep up that spilled flour can be fun for children. The bombardment of society as to what children love has become so commercialized. The more children engage in electronic activities the more they will crave more of it. There is a book I love to recommend to parents titled

Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids

Book by Kim John Payne and Lisa M. Ross

Now, to get on to the nuts and bolts of this email I will let you know that Ms. Irwin and I are meeting at school on Monday to put together some weaving and sewing kits for your children if that is something you think you would like to work on over the next two weeks. I will let you know that these activities do require adult supervision so only ask for your child's weaving or sewing activity if you are willing to work on it with them and have the time and needed patience to do so. (Sometimes the strings get VERY tangled and needles need to be threaded often). For the five and six year old children we will put together small weaving kits in your child's personalized sewing pouch. There is a condition, however. If you take the kit home, it must be returned with the scissors and weaving/sewing needle inside not later than January 4th. Also, you will be responsible for keeping the scissors and needle safe and used for the project only. For four year olds we will send home a small project that will require the running stitch to complete. The same adult supervision and condition of return will apply. We use these sewing pouches a lot during the school year and pass them on to the next group of students, so don't want to lose them. If you would like your child's weaving or sewing to be assembled for them and left on the porch at school to be picked up on Monday evening or during the day on Tuesday, please respond to this email.

Other options for at-home activities I can put together for you are:

Age five and six:

Cursive handwriting papers or booklets designed for your child

Simple books or reading word cards at their level

Number writing papers

*You can substitute coloring with your child for formal writing. Make cards to snail mail to relatives. Children LOVE to draw and color and our classroom of children inspire me all the time with their beautiful drawings and paintings. A simple set of watercolors or a pack of nicely sharpened pencils or box of markers shared with them following a story you read to them or tell them may produce beautiful thoughts and pictures to mail as gifts. Those children who are able can be asked their thoughts and come up with some letters on their own or copy some letters you write for them. At school the kindergarten kids designed their holiday writing entries for Samuel's library with movable letters from our movable alphabets and then copied the letters on paper to submit for the annual contest. If you haven't heard, we had three writing winners, first, second and third place, and a first time art winner from our kindergarten class!!

For the four turning five year olds:

Number writing papers with a few select cursive letter suggestions

For the four year olds and all children:

Cutting papers with or without holiday theme

Coloring papers

Large paper for making gift wrap with your child. (Hand or foot prints are adorable.)

For all kids I can offer some cookie recipes if you would like to bake with your children at home. I love to bake and am always happy to share recipes if you ask me. Reading the Gingerbread Boy and then baking gingerbread cookies makes for a nice tradition. Making dog biscuits for your pet makes for a nice tradition, too. You can buy dog bone cookie cutters and there are many recipes for dog and cat treats on the internet. The children LOVE giving gifts to those they love!

A few of you had some ideas for things you were planning to do at home for the two week period. When you email me to let me know if you would like me to design a little at-home package for you, with or without weaving or sewing, don't hesitate to ask me about your own at-home ideas. I would be happy to assist you with a plan.

Sincerely,
Carrie